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A MONASTERY FOR THE REVOLUTION:
ERNESTO CARDENAL, THOMAS MERTON, AND THE PARADOX OF VIOLENCE IN
NICARAGUA, 1957-1979

By
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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

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History

A MONASTERY FOR THE REVOLUTION: ERNESTO CARDENAL, THOMAS MERTON, AND THE PARADOX OF VIOLENCE IN NICARAGUA, 1957-1979

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Jody Pavilack

In 1957, a young Nicaraguan poet named Ernesto Cardenal, recently graduated from Columbia University, entered the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani, located outside Louisville, Kentucky. There he met a prominent Catholic thinker and pacifist, Thomas Merton, who soon mentored young Cardenal. Though Cardenal departed Gethsemani in 1959, Merton continued to counsel him in spirituality, poetry, and social activism until Merton's death in 1968. While Cardenal during these earlier years was a committed pacifist, his experiences after returning to Nicaragua in 1965 radically altered his view of social action. Cardenal established a semi-monastic community in the Solentiname islands in southern Nicaragua, and in a series of bible studies with the people who came to stay there, found himself increasingly committed to the social vision of the Marxist Sandinista movement. In 1973, Cardenal formally declared his support for the FSLN, the military wing of the Sandinista revolution. By 1979, the revolution succeeded in overthrowing the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, and Cardenal became the Minister of Culture under the new Sandinista government. This paper will address the formative influence of Thomas Merton on Ernesto Cardenal, and how Cardenal came to accept the use of violence in the pursuit of social justice. In particular, analysis will concentrate on Ernesto Cardenal's ideological transformations that led to his ultimate support for and involvement in the Sandinista revolution. My research draws from the written correspondence between Merton and Cardenal, and from interviews, and major publications. This paper will argue that while Cardenal never fully supported violence, he nonetheless joined the revolution both out of devotion to Merton's teaching and out of necessary solidarity with his countrymen.

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In Nicaragua in the 1960s and 1970s, revolution began in many places with the word of God. Across the country, Catholic priests heard a renewed call to live amongst the poor, and to address not only their spiritual needs, but also their material and social needs. One such priest, Ernesto Cardenal, established a parish in 1965 on a remote island in the south of the country. Reflecting on the parish, he wrote, “In Solentiname, a remote archipelago in Lake Nicaragua, populated by peasants, on Sundays we had, instead of a sermon on the gospel, a dialogue.”¹ These dialogues, far from simple conversation, began a process amongst parishioners of deep spiritual reflection on their experiences of poverty, oppression, and earthly suffering. In Cardenal’s introduction to *The Gospel in Solentiname*, his record of Sunday dialogues in Solentiname, he wrote about the power of these conversations, and the effect they had on the politics of those present. “These commentaries on the gospel were radicalizing, for me and others in the community,” he said. “Little by little we began identifying with the revolutionary movement in Nicaragua, until a moment arrived in which we had practically been incorporated into it.”²

The revolutionary movement Cardenal spoke of was the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), a guerilla political organization that fought to overthrow the military dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. The FSLN successfully overthrew Somoza in 1979, after which Cardenal became the Minister of Culture under the new Sandinista government. When Cardenal wrote *The Gospel in Solentiname* 1977, he was an active participant in the FSLN, fighting for the “Sandinista Revolution” in a political rather than a military role.³ While he never personally participated in the violence, he nonetheless supported the FSLN’s military campaign, and frequently defended the actions of his parishioners who participated in revolutionary violence. In 1977, he said, “In reality, every authentic revolution prefers non-

¹ Ernesto Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, Reprint, (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2006), 11. Translation of this text is my own unless otherwise noted.

² Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 13.

³ Ernesto Cardenal, “No crean las calumnias sobre la Nicaragua (carta a un amigo),” *Cuadernos Americanos*, vol 44, March-April 1985, 23-27 as reprinted in Benjamin Keen, “The Church in the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *Latin American Civilization*, 7th ed., (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000) 437-441.

violence to violence; but you don't always have the liberty to choose."⁴ In other words, Cardenal by 1977 believed that in Nicaragua, violence was necessary to counter the extreme violence and repression of the Somoza regime.⁵ However in addition to pragmatic justification, Cardenal relied on the Christian gospel to defend the revolution. He described revolutionary efforts in spiritual terms, praising the morality and restraint of the guerrillas and the leaders of the revolution, and emphasizing that he joined the FSLN out of his pastoral obligations and his commitment to the people he served.⁶

Surprisingly, though Cardenal eventually came to support armed revolution in Nicaragua, his spiritual education began under the tutelage of an ardent pacifist: Thomas Merton. Merton was a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani near Louisville, Kentucky, and one of the most prolific and influential Catholic writers in the United States.⁷ Merton's corresponded with a wide circle of writers, public intellectuals, activists, and priests. He also was one of the most politically active Catholics in the US pacifist movement, writing in vehement opposition to the war in Vietnam and to the nuclear arms race between the US and the Soviet Union.⁸ From 1957 to 1959, Cardenal stayed in the Abbey of Gethsemani as a novice—a candidate for entrance into

⁴ Ernesto Cardenal, "Lo que fue Solentiname," *El Ciervo*, año 26, no. 320, (1977), 24-25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40810033>, (accessed February 2, 2015). Translation of this text is my own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ See Ernesto Cardenal, "Letter of Response," *The National Catholic Reporter*, (Sept. 17, 1979), compiled in "The Cardenal-Berrigan Exchange," *Voices of Non-Violence*, theology course, University of Notre Dame, electronic reprint, <http://www3.nd.edu/~theo/jhy/writings/otherauthors/EXCHANGE.htm>, (accessed February 15, 2015).

⁶ Two writings that best demonstrate this point are Cardenal, "In Nicaragua no Paradise is Possible, and Cardenal, "No crean las calumnias sobre la Nicaragua."

⁷ The Trappists are officially known as the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, a monastic religious order within the Catholic Church. Monks and nuns within this order take vows of obedience, stability, conversion of life, which includes celibacy, fasting, and separation from the world. They live year-round in an Abbey largely secluded from normal life, and they spend the majority of their time in silence apart from prayer and spiritual discussion. The website for the Trappist order provides perhaps the most accessible general overview of Trappist history and observance: "Becoming a Trappist Monk or Nun," <http://www.trappists.org/>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

⁸ Merton's role in the US Catholic Pacifist movement, as well as his correspondence with various Catholic intellectuals and writers, can be seen in anthologies of his writings. See Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) and Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen, (The United States of America: HarperOne, 2008).

the Trappist Order who has not yet taken vows. Merton was assigned to mentor the novitiate in those years, and he had a profound impact on Cardenal's spiritual development. Due to illness, Cardenal left Gethsemani prior to taking his vows in 1959. Despite this, Merton corresponded with Cardenal regularly. In much of the correspondence between 1965 and 1968, Merton encouraged Cardenal's project in Solentiname, and expressed his support for Cardenal's ministry to the poor.

Merton died by 1968, never witnessing Cardenal's political activity with the FSLN or the course of the Sandinista Revolution. Cardenal during the 1960s likely shared Merton's pacifism. In 1977, Cardenal himself remembered,

My former teacher, Thomas Merton...told me that the contemplative person in Latin America was not able to remain outside of political struggles. At first we preferred a resolution with non-violent methods.... Later we realized that in Nicaragua, a non-violent struggle is not actually practical, and that Gandhi himself would be in agreement with us.⁹

His emphasis on preferring "non-violent methods" before the revolution implies that at one time, his devotion to non-violence was stricter. Though Cardenal never discussed pacifism in detail, he certainly understood his political development as one of gradual acceptance of the violent tactics used in the revolution. Cardenal also acknowledged Merton's influence, tying Merton's instruction to Cardenal's activity in Nicaraguan politics. This link between Merton's teaching and Cardenal's eventual embrace of the FSLN suggests a development that seems paradoxical: Cardenal came to accept violence in the revolution not only out of practical necessity, but out of a spirituality founded in large part on the teaching Thomas Merton, a devout and vocal pacifist. However strange, this connection is critical in understanding the spiritual dimension of Cardenal's political activity.

Very little scholarship exists on Cardenal's political activity, or his connections to Thomas Merton. Merton was one of the most influential spiritual thinkers in the US during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, and unsurprisingly has been the subject of numerous biographies and scholarly works.¹⁰ Many scholars have likewise addressed the role of the Catholic Church in

⁹ Cardenal, "Lo que fue Solentiname," 24.

¹⁰ For biographies, see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) and Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (New York: Harper &

Nicaraguan politics, referencing, but not elaborating on Ernesto Cardenal. Historians John M. Kirk and Debra Sabia have both published detailed histories of the Church in Nicaraguan politics, and their works have included brief (two to three page) mentions of Cardenal and Solentiname.¹¹ Literary critics Henry Cohen and Claudia Schaefer-Rodriguez have both focused on the political implications of Cardenal's poetry, analyzing the development of his political consciousness and the way in which his poetry shaped his political philosophy as Minister of Culture in the 1980s.¹² However, their accounts rely almost exclusively on Cardenal's poems, and both omit discussions of Thomas Merton and Solentiname.

Ernesto Cardenal's perspectives on violence have yet to receive even a paper-length discussion, and virtually no major North American scholarly accounts of his interactions with Thomas Merton have yet been written. That said, Getúlio Antônio Bertelli of the University of Paraná in Curitiba, Brazil, published an article on Merton and Cardenal's relationship, and their contribution to the "spirituality of liberation."¹³ Bertelli argues that Merton's influence on Cardenal's social activism was profound, however he focuses on contextualizing Cardenal and Merton's theologies in a broader discourse of Liberation Theology. He thus shies away from discussions of their politics. While he references Merton's political activism, he does not

Row, 1980). A wealth of articles written on Merton exist in a variety of journals, however one journal in particular devotes its content to scholarship on Merton's life, work, and legacy. See *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality, and Social Concerns*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, 1988-2015).

¹¹ John M. Kirk, *Politics and the Catholic Church in Nicaragua*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1992). Debra Sabia, *Contradiction and Conflict: The Popular Church in Nicaragua*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1997).

¹² Henry Cohen, "Daniel Boone, Moses and the Indians: Ernesto Cardenal's Evolution from Alienation to Social Commitment," *Chasquí*, vol. 11, 1, (1981) 21-32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29739711>, (accessed February 1, 2015), and Claudia Schaefer-Rodriguez, "Peace, Poetry, and Popular Culture: Ernesto Cardenal and the Nicaraguan Revolution," *Latin American Literary Review*, vol. 13, 26 (1985) 8-10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20111355> (accessed February 1, 2015).

¹³ Getúlio Antônio Bertelli, "Dangerous Memory and Solidary Fate: the Contribution of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal to the Spirituality of the Latin American Liberation," *Ciberteologia: Journal of Theology & Culture*, issue 34. 2011, trans. Thomas McGrath, <http://ciberteologia.paulinas.org.br/ciberteologiaen/index.php/articles/dangerous-memory-and-solidary-fate-the-contribution-of-thomas-merton-and-ernesto-cardenal-to-the-spirituality-of-the-latin-american-liberation/> (accessed February 20, 2015).

examine Cardenal's embrace of armed revolution, except for a brief account of Cardenal's inspiration by figures such as Camilo Torres.¹⁴

This paper seeks to fill the gap in historical scholarship surrounding Cardenal. Through careful analysis of Ernesto Cardenal's personal correspondence with Thomas Merton, interviews, poetry, and other published works, this paper examines Cardenal's transition from his stance of pacifism to his embrace of the FSLN. Merton plays a leading role in this story. The Solentiname project grew out of his guidance, and Cardenal throughout his life has emphasized that Merton was formative in understanding his spiritual call. Though Cardenal's departure from strict pacifism appears to deny the spiritual and social ideals of his Trappist background, he justified support for the revolution through his social commitment as a contemplative Christian—a commitment he learned from Merton. Paradoxically, Cardenal supported violence out of loyalty to Merton's vision even though Merton strictly denounced war. This paper argues that Ernesto Cardenal joined the Sandinista Revolution as the best means for achieving a more peaceful, loving, and just society. The society he imagined derived from the influence of Thomas Merton and from Cardenal's own experiences in Solentiname. Far from incorporating violent revolution into his social vision, Cardenal came to accept violence as a necessary evil, which played only a limited role in a broader revolution that would lead to peace.

When Ernesto Cardenal arrived at Gethsemani, he had known of Merton for a number of years, and read his works thoroughly during his studies at Columbia University. Cardenal began to consider entering a vocation in the Church after reading a number of Merton's works. In his introduction to *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, a collection of Merton and his personal letters, Cardenal wrote, "The religious impact that [Merton's] books produced in me was so great that many times I thought of writing Merton to ask him if I should have a [religious] vocation or not."¹⁵ When Cardenal finally decided to enter religious life, he wrote to the Abbey of

¹⁴ Camilo Torres (1929-1966) was born in Bogotá, Colombia, and ordained as a diocesan priest in 1954. By 1966, he joined the Marxist *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, and that same year died in combat. Getúlio Antônio Bertelli argues that Cardenal was deeply inspired by Torres' writings and example. See Bertelli, "Dangerous Memory and Solidary Fate," 35-37.

¹⁵ Ernesto Cardenal, "Historia de una Correspondencia," *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, ed. Santiago Daydí-Tolson, (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2004) 31-32. Translation of text is my own unless otherwise noted.

Gethsemani asking for admission. By 1957, Cardenal was admitted to the Abbey under Merton's counsel.¹⁶

For two years, Merton advised Cardenal on matters of the spirit, as well as matters of poetry and politics. In his recollections of Merton, Cardenal often expressed surprise at how wide-ranging and often secular their conversations were. "At first I was disconcerted by the way in which he imparted spiritual direction," Cardenal wrote. "I had the incredible privilege of receiving my instruction from the grand master of mysticism who for so many years I had admired. And when [we began speaking], he began to ask me of Nicaragua, of Somoza, Nicaraguan poets, other Latin American poets, other dictators..."¹⁷ Cardenal at first expressed great frustration at having wasted so much time for spiritual guidance on secular matters. However Cardenal eventually conceded that the secular discussions had a purpose, and that he had learned through them that renouncing all political and social concerns was not only unhealthy for a monk, but that it ran counter to a monastic's duty to engage with the world. Cardenal recalled, "All of this [meaning secular subjects] that he talked about with me in spiritual direction was like a Zen teaching, I think. Instead of talking with me about the "spiritual" life, he spoke with me about anything...In the end it resulted that he taught me to be like him, in whom the spiritual life was not separated from any other human interest."¹⁸ It was this attention to the intersection of the spiritual and the worldly concerns that ultimately led Cardenal not only away from the monastery and into the priesthood, but also back to Nicaragua, and to Solentiname.

Cardenal left Solentiname in 1959 due to illness brought on by the regimented lifestyle of the monastery. Cardenal recalled, "I had a frequent headache that later was becoming chronic. In the hospital they discovered that it was caused by gastritis, and the gastritis caused by nervous tension, and the nervous tension they supposed was caused by the rigidity of Trappist life, and they recommended an order more flexible like the Benedictine."¹⁹ The decision, despite his physical discomfort, appears to have been very difficult for Cardenal. In Merton's first letter to Cardenal after his departure from the monastery, Merton spent nearly two pages reassuring Cardenal, and advising him on the merits of his new spiritual calling. "You must not regard this

¹⁶ Cardenal, "Historia de una Correspondencia," 31-33.

¹⁷ Cardenal, "Historia de una Correspondencia," 33.

¹⁸ Cardenal, "Historia de una Correspondencia," 34.

¹⁹ Cardenal, "Historia de una Correspondencia," 34.

as the end of your vocation,” Merton wrote. “On the contrary, it is an entirely necessary step...in your spiritual maturity, and that is why it is difficult for you...What next? You must wait patiently, prayerfully, and in peace. No one can say yet whether you should enter another monastery.”²⁰ Merton’s letter indicates that upon Cardenal’s departure, he still did not have a clear plan as to where his ministry and spiritual journey would lead.

Although Cardenal in 1959 did not know where he would settle and what role he would have in the Church, it is clear from his own writings and his letters with Merton that they had discussed the founding of some kind of contemplative community in Latin America.²¹ Cardenal departed Gethsemani upon official transfer from the Church to a Benedictine monastery in Cuernavaca, México. He found the monastery there agreeable, and although he wrote to Merton, “I have no desire to return to the world...because I don’t belong to it. Therefore I am sure that I have not lost my vocation, and that I belong to God alone...”²² Cardenal clearly desired to remain in some kind of contemplative community, though he was willing to be flexible as to that community’s lifestyle. It is difficult to determine how developed the idea that became Solentiname was in 1959, however it is clear that it grew out of Cardenal’s desire for a contemplative life, and Merton’s desire for a new, reformed monastic community in Latin America.

According to Cardenal, he and Merton had discussed the idea of founding a monastery in Latin America at least to some extent before Cardenal left Gethsemani. In his history of his correspondence with Merton, Cardenal revealed that Merton had long dreamt of establishing Trappist-inspired contemplative community in Latin America. “First he talked of a Trappist reform for Latin America,” Cardenal wrote, “After that, of a foundation outside of the order; a simple contemplative life, without routine, without rules, without the anachronistic structures of the monastic orders.”²³ It appears that as Cardenal prepared to leave Gethsemani in 1959, he and Merton were planning just this. Speaking about his departure from Gethsemani, Cardenal wrote

²⁰ Merton, a letter to Ernesto Cardenal dated August 17, 1959, *The Courage for Truth*, 112-113.

²¹ “Contemplative” is a Christian term for “monastic,” in other words, referring to someone who lives as a nun or a monk. The term refers to the goal of monastic life: spiritual introspection.

²² Letter from Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton, dated August 9, 1959, *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, 41.

²³ Ernesto Cardenal and Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton-Ernesto Cardenal: Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, ed. Santiago Daydi-Tolson, (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2004), 33. All translation of Spanish text is my own unless otherwise noted.

that Merton “would reunite with me in Mexico for the foundation [presumably a monastery], which we had not even decided where it would be. Upon saying goodbye to me, he told me that his authorization [to leave] had been denied [and] that I should study for the priesthood and after ordination make this foundation in Nicaragua.”²⁴

The letters exchanged between Cardenal and Merton in this period seem to indicate that any plans were perhaps less solidified than Cardenal remembered years later. Still, in a letter dated September 12, 1959, Merton wrote of a friend his, saying “I told her about Corn Island and she was enthusiastic. I have had no information about it though, and do not know whether the Bishop will stop by to talk about it.”²⁵ According to the editors of *The Courage for Truth*, Corn Island was a site “off the coast of Nicaragua where Cardenal and Merton thought about founding a monastery.”²⁶ Certainly this idea seems consistent with what Cardenal remembered, and with he and Merton’s periodic references to the founding of a monastery in Latin America. Despite their planning, however, Merton and Cardenal never succeeded in co-founding a new order. Cardenal instead remained in Mexico, first at the Cuernavaca monastery and later at a Jesuit seminary, to study for ordination as a priest.²⁷ In 1965, Cardenal travelled between Colombia and Nicaragua to complete his ordination, which he finalized in Nicaragua on August 15, 1965.²⁸

Immediately following his ordination as a priest, Ernesto Cardenal obtained permission to begin ministry in Nicaragua, which led him in February of 1966 to put down roots in the Solentiname islands in southern Lake Nicaragua.²⁹ The Solentiname islands consist of 38 different islands, and according to Cardenal, had in the 1960s and 70s around 1,000 inhabitants from approximately 90 families. Islanders lived simply in houses with thatched straw roofs.³⁰ It

²⁴ Cardenal, “Historia de una Correspondencia,” 35.

²⁵ Merton, a letter to Ernesto Cardenal dated September 12, 1959, *The Courage for Truth*, 115.

²⁶ Ibid. This quote comes from an in-text parenthetical that Christine Bochen added.

²⁷ Cardenal announced his intention to enter the seminary in El Salvador in a letter to Thomas Merton, dated August 25, 1959, *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, 47, however in a letter written on March 11, 1960, Cardenal informed Merton that he would stay at Cuernavaca, and continue his study in Mexico. *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, 67.

²⁸ Letter from Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton, sent from Managua, dated January 28, 1965, *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, 148 and Letter from Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton, sent from La Ceja, Colombia, dated August, 1965, *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, 155-156.

²⁹ Letter from Ernesto Cardenal to Thomas Merton, sent from Managua, dated February 22, 1966, *Correspondencia (1959-1968)*, 166-167.

³⁰ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 12.

was in this isolated setting that Cardenal developed a new pastoral program for a church he would found on the island of Mancarrón, the largest in the Solentiname archipelago.³¹

Solentiname took a decidedly contemplative turn under the leadership of Cardenal. *Campesinos*, artists, and intellectuals participated in spiritual contemplation at weekly masses.³² Though many lived near the church, others travelled further, often from other islands. Despite the isolation of the community, Cardenal takes care to note in *The Gospel in Solentiname* that the community was not static. Frequently visiting artists, intellectuals, and priests came from across Nicaragua and even from outside the country to attend mass and live amongst the community for a week or two. The goal of the project from the beginning, however, was to cultivate a deep sense of religious community within Solentiname. In a way, with the Solentiname project Cardenal implemented Merton's vision of a contemplative community free from the rigors of monastic life. In a letter to Cardenal written in 1966, Merton told him,

I think that if you accept [the office of pastor] in simplicity and let the people understand what you are doing, you could have a very beautiful community of the poor around the monastery and in a sort of spiritual relationship with it, which would be much more fruitful than an ordinary parish, and could really develop into something in the future.³³

It was out of this desire that Solentiname grew in its structure and methods of community engagement.

Cardenal directed much of his focus toward helping the community develop social programs. "We were also developing community employment for young *campesinos* by way of a cooperative," he remembered. "We were also about to establish a European-style dairy and cheese factory for the cooperative, aided by a German institution."³⁴ Cardenal's preoccupation

³¹ Steve Bailey, "In Lush Nicaragua, Legacy of a Priest," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2012, (accessed electronically April 3, 2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/04/travel/on-the-solentiname-islands-in-nicaragua-an-edén-with-art.html?_r=0. The church was named *Nuestra Señora de Solentiname*, "Our Lady of Solentiname."

³² *Campesino* means "peasant" in this context, however the term is not pejorative in Spanish as it is in English. Therefore I will continue using the term *campesino* in reference to the residents of Solentiname throughout the remainder of this paper.

³³ Thomas Merton, from a letter written to Ernesto Cardenal, October 14, 1966, published in *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 157.

³⁴ Cardenal, "Lo que fue Solentiname," 25.

with the overall health and development of the community is evident in his support for the cultural and economic programs he supported in Solentiname. Like a monastic community, Cardenal sought not only to guide parishioners spiritually, but also to help them better support themselves using their own labor and resources in a way that was spiritually rewarding. Of course, the community of Our Lady of Solentiname also attended mass and discussed spiritual matters in the context of their day-to-day lives.

As pastor of the Solentiname parish, Cardenal facilitated weekly bible studies that encouraged lay parishioners to engage in a theological interpretation of scripture that applied to their own lives. These bible studies served not only to allow ordinary people to connect with scripture, but to also better understand as Christians how to address their experiences of poverty and political repression. Cardenal documented his memories and transcripts of community bible studies in his 1975 publication, *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (*The Gospel in Solentiname*). Community “commentaries” occurred often during mass and other times during communal lunches after mass. Many of the dialogues he recorded came from his memory. However, after he decided to publish these conversations, Cardenal began recording talks with a tape recorder. Thus, while *El Evangelio en Solentiname* must be understood as a text produced by Cardenal and influenced by his own biases and goals, it nonetheless provides a good suggestion as to the nature of conversations in Solentiname. According to Cardenal’s more recent introduction to the book, “the commentary of these *campesinos* was usually of greater depth than that of many theologians, but of a simplicity like the gospel itself...the gospel...(the good news to the poor) was written for them, and for people like them.”³⁵ The commentary also became a vehicle through which poor *campesinos* could begin to analyze their own lives both in the context of scripture and in the context of the revolution that was gaining ground in Nicaragua. The revolution and its Marxist orientation did not escape the people who lived in Solentiname. Marxist discourse became a common feature of Sunday discussions, and for this reason many *campesinos* more fearful of affiliating with subversive groups avoided the church.³⁶ Still, for those who came, mass with Cardenal became a transformative experience.

Almost all of the *campesinos* and guests who participated in Cardenal’s discussions each Sunday related their understanding of scripture with their ideas about the Sandinista Revolution.

³⁵ Ernesto Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, Reprint, (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2006), 11.

³⁶ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 12.

Cardenal, introducing *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, wrote explicitly that the community explicitly engaged in Marxist analysis, and that the group's Marxism was a direct response to their repression under the Somoza dictatorship. The dictatorship "was always present in them," Cardenal wrote, "together with hope and the coming liberation. I have said that these are Marxist commentaries on the gospel, and that it is the gospel interpreted in the light of the revolution."³⁷ Many from the Solentiname community showed tremendous faith not only in the word of the bible, but also in the Sandinista Revolution, which promised a future of freedom.

Some of the parishioners were ardently pro-revolution from the beginning. One in particular, Laureno, many other *campesinos* frequently equated their ideal of a "Christian society" with "the revolution" or a "socialist society." More traditional quotations of Marx also entered into the conversation. At one point, he even responded to a gospel passage critical of Jewish law saying that Christ believed "religion [was] the opiate of the village."³⁸ Laureno, while the most radical, was certainly not the only member of the village to commit devoutly to the cause of socialism. In fact, Cardenal stated in various writings and interviews that the gospel was the most radicalizing force for both himself and his congregation.³⁹ By "radicalizing," Cardenal explicitly meant that the gospel pushed members of his congregation and himself toward an embrace of the revolution more than any other force. To understand how Cardenal ultimately accepted violence, then, it is necessary to examine how the Solentiname community came to interpret the gospel in the context of the revolution.

People from all parts of Solentiname, as well as guests in the congregation, expressed deep concern over the nature of exploitation in Nicaragua. They interpreted the gospel both as a way to reflect on how they themselves felt exploited by the government, but also to understand how to respond to the exploitation of themselves and other *campesinos*. The discussion of Jesus' parable of the fruit trees provides a helpful example of the way in which the Solentiname community discussed exploitation. The parable as Cardenal presented it reads, "There is no good

³⁷ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 13.

³⁸ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 431. In the text, Cardenal proceeds to qualify Laureno's statement in the next paragraph. He points out that while Christ indicated religion is not the infallible way to God, those with religion are nevertheless near to heaven. For the corresponding bible verse, see Mark 12: 28-34.

³⁹ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 13, "These commentaries on the gospel were radicalizing, for me and for the others in the community." Also, see Cardenal, "Lo que fue Solentiname," 24.

tree that can give bad fruit; nor is there a bad tree that can give good fruit. So each tree you will know by its fruits: one cannot harvest figs from thorns, nor can one gather grapes from brambles.”⁴⁰ Many responded by applying the parable to Marxist theories. A more scholarly member of the community, William, said, “it seems to me too that what Jesus is telling us...is that the good and the bad in man likewise obey the natural laws of history, which we call also the laws of historical materialism...In a system of exploitation of man by man, that it would produce love between men is as anti-natural as harvesting figs from thorns.”⁴¹ William’s concern with exploitation’s link to “love between men” is important here. The church community was very sensitive to the implication the gospel’s moral teachings had in their own lives, as well as the implication for efforts to bring about socialism in Nicaragua. They largely envisioned socialism as a means toward a society rooted in a common love for human beings. Thus, as William argued, they feared that exploitation divorced society from an environment more suited to facilitating mutual love and compassion.

Of course, exploitation was not the only concern amongst parishioners. Even before members of the congregation became politically active, the people living in Solentiname were well versed in the brutality of the regime, and had either seen or heard extensively about kidnappings, torture, and murder of those they loved or had known. The infamous “massacre of the innocents,” from early in the gospel, proved an ignition point for discussion of violence in one Sunday mass. The gospel passage as they responded to it read, “After the magi left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to him: Get up, take your child [Jesus] and his mother, and flee to the land of Egypt and remain there until I tell you. Because Herod will go looking for the child to kill him.”⁴² The people present at that day’s bible study responded in a variety of ways, with great emotion, each time out of their own personal experiences with the regime.

Fernando Cardenal, Ernesto Cardenal’s brother who was also a Jesuit priest, was present for many Solentiname discussions, including the discussion on the massacre of the innocents. He responded almost immediately to the passage, meditating on how the verse applied to a common experience in Nicaragua. He said,

⁴⁰ Luke 6: 43-44 as quoted in Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 187.

⁴¹ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 188.

⁴² Matthew 2: 12-13 as quoted in Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 45.

How many times I've read [this passage]...but only now as a patrol from the army is about to come, I realized exactly the very real and difficult circumstance the gospel presents us with here: repression. We can imagine what it means: to leave in the night, hidden, very fearful, leaving all their things, and having to look for the border because they are being pursued.⁴³

The patrol that Fernando referenced in this passage was a patrol of Somoza's National Guard that frequently interrupted life in Solentiname. The afternoon after the community read the passage on Jesus' family's flight into Egypt, the guard arrived seeking information about the FSLN and hoping to root out communist sympathizers. This immediate threat seems to have contributed the urgency with which that day's discussion addressed the repression of the Somoza regime. One boy added that Somoza's repression was not just through physical violence, but also through economic inequality. He talked at length about "how much there is infant mortality, and so many scrawny, malnourished children. I believe that is the persecution of children."⁴⁴

After some discussion about the brutality of Somoza's National Guard, the conversation turned to a prominent political activist who had recently been killed by the regime, and who some of the Solentiname community members seem to have known personally. Some unnamed women commented that the passage discussed, "the same thing that happens in the present, and it is because whoever fights for liberation of the oppressed, the same as a Christ, there is then a Herod...And there will come more Herods, because always when there is someone that fights for liberation there is someone who wants to kill them..."⁴⁵ This particular sentiment emerged frequently in discussions in Solentiname. The group often compared people who had fought for revolutions in Latin America—Che Guevara and César Augusto Sandino in particular—to Christ, elevating their actions to the kind of service of the poor and of God for which Jesus set an example.⁴⁶ They also often referred to the Somoza regime as emblematic of various New Testament villains, from Herod to Pontius Pilate (or the Romans more broadly) to Judas, the betrayer of Jesus.

⁴³ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 45.

⁴⁴ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 46.

⁴⁵ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 46.

⁴⁶ For examples of this with Che see Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 177-80. For examples with César Augusto Sandino see the same, 459-460.

As with the example of Che Guevara and Sandino, discussions of violence and the suffering of Nicaragua's *campesinos* often led to a more international sense of solidarity. This sentiment affected not only the group's reading of Christ-like parallels, but also the way in which they understood their own revolution in relation to the experiences of other ordinary Latin Americans. In one conversation about violence, Laureno responded, "It makes me think of what happened in Chile, where they have killed thousands of people just because liberation was being born there: many they loaded en an airplane and booted them out into the sea."⁴⁷ Clearly, the people of Solentiname were aware not only of the repression present in their own community, but also in Nicaragua as a whole and across Latin America.

Ultimately, the Solentiname community's interpretations of the gospel underpinned their justification for participating in the revolution. Both those who took up arms against Somoza and those, like Cardenal, who supported the revolution through other means came to understand the gospel as a declaration that God was on their side, and that Christ would have supported their struggle to free Nicaragua's poor from violence, political repression, and economic injustice. Their sense of Latin American solidarity heightened their feeling that participation in the revolution was not only necessary for themselves, but to live as Christians in defense of all those who suffer injustice.

Christ's commandment to "turn the other cheek" sparked one of the most informative discussions in Solentiname regarding this call to community defense. The commandment read, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who insult you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer them the other cheek. And if someone takes your bag, let them also take your shirt."⁴⁸ Initially the group was uncertain how to interpret this passage, which seemed to condemn any retaliation to violence or injustice. The group for a time started to think that perhaps the passage was intended specifically for the rich to discourage them from defending the taking of their property with violence. One member of the group, Manuel, said, "So then all this about the other cheek is only for the rich, and the poor don't ever have to offer the other cheek?"⁴⁹ Cardenal's response is telling:

⁴⁷ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 48.

⁴⁸ Luke 6: 27-29 as quoted in Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 177.

⁴⁹ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 179.

This is a precept also for the poor, and it is very revolutionary. It means to say that we should rise above ourselves, depose all our personal pride and individualism, not fight for our own interests but only for the good of the rest.

And this isn't to say don't fight, but do not fight for yourself but for the rest.⁵⁰

On the one hand, Cardenal's response corrected the group's assumption that the commandment did not apply to them. However he was also careful not to let this rebuke also suggest that the commandment prohibited the poor and oppressed from participated in armed struggle. Cardenal understood the passage as addressing the need for service to others. Other members of the community also added, after his correction, that it likely was intended to mean that one should come to the defense of someone suffering injustice, and offer one's cheek in place of theirs. It may seem a difficult interpretation to follow, but Cardenal clearly understood its implications. In his view, this moment in the gospel mandated not only that Christians confront injustice, but that they do so if necessary by risking their own physical wellbeing.

Cardenal wrote one of his clearest reflections on why he joined the FSLN years after the revolution's triumph. In an article for *Cuadernos Americanos* in 1985, Cardenal wrote,

When, in 1973, Commander Eduardo Contreras (assassinated in 1976) asked me to accept an official role in the work of the FSLN, I instantly accepted, remembering the parable of the Good Samaritan... The Samaritans of Nicaragua asked me to help cure our wounded people and, given my Christian faith, I could give only one answer: commitment.⁵¹

In this passage, too, we see Cardenal's willingness to accept danger and the threat of violence in the name of Christian action. He saw commitment to the FSLN as not only a way to minister to Nicaragua's "wounded people," but also as a defensive action that consisted of placing his life in jeopardy to try to save the lives of Nicaragua's poor and oppressed.

Cardenal's sense that the FSLN was, in fact, defending the lives of *campesinos* is perhaps most tangible in an open letter he published in *The National Catholic Reporter* in 1979. The letter responded to criticism from a U.S. priest, Daniel Berrigan, over Cardenal's acceptance of the revolution's violence. Cardenal wrote, "'Father Berrigan wrote to me in that letter that no

⁵⁰ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 179.

⁵¹ Cardenal, "No crean las calumnias sobre la Nicaragua," 440. The parable can be found in Luke 10: 25-37.

principle—no matter how high it is— was worth the spilled blood of even just one child. I agree with this. But for the same reason I feel that no principle—no matter how noble—even the principle of staunch non-violence—is worth more than the blood of this one child.”⁵² Cardenal’s rebuttal raised the question of violence in a defensive way: Cardenal was shifting Berrigan’s consideration from the violence deployed by the revolution to the violence unleashed by Somoza’s military. He continued, writing, “One can’t compare the weapons of common people in Nicaragua, with their .22 caliber guns or machetes and sticks and stones, to the heavy arms of Somoza’s National Guard, supplied to him by the United States and Israel.”⁵³ Cardenal thus believed firmly that the magnitude of Somoza’s forces outweighed the moral wrong of violent retaliation, and indeed, necessitated violence out of self-defense. His argument hinged on his belief that the revolution was operating in defense of the children of Nicaragua.

To justify the FSLN’s use of violence as defensive, Cardenal relied not only on his concern for Nicaraguans oppressed by Somoza, but also situated that concern within the Church’s longstanding doctrine of “just war.” Cardenal, in an article in the Costa Rican periodical *El Ciervo* wrote, “At first we [in Solentiname] had preferred a revolution with a non-violent method of fighting (although without ignoring the Church’s traditional principle of just war, and the right to legitimate defense of individuals and their homes). But afterwards, we began to realize that in Nicaragua a non-violent fight was not practicable.”⁵⁴ Cardenal on the one hand found non-violence impractical for reasons he stated in his response to Daniel Berrigan—he came to believe .22 caliber rifles, machetes, and rocks were comparatively poor weapons, but necessary weapons, in order to have a chance at fighting Somoza’s well-armed national guard. However Cardenal’s invocation of Just War theory is critical to understanding his justification for violence. He believed that the revolution was, indeed, defending individuals and their homes from Somoza, a conclusion that he came to with many others in Solentiname. Cardenal also believed, as he revealed in his interpretation of the command to “turn the other cheek,” that Christians were obligated to defend others who were suffering from injustice. Therefore, as a

⁵² Ernesto Cardenal, “Letter of Response,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, (September 17, 1979), as published in “The Cardenal-Berrigan Exchange,” *Voices of Non-Violence*, theology course, University of Notre Dame, electronic reprint, <http://www3.nd.edu/~theo/jhy/writings/otherauthors/EXCHANGE.htm>, (accessed February 15, 2015).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Cardenal, “Lo que fue Solentiname,” 24.

Christian, Cardenal felt an obligation to support the FSLN in defending the people of Nicaragua who could not defend themselves: the poor, the sick, the elderly, and the children.

Cardenal, and many of his parishioners in Solentiname, indeed saw the revolution as an immediate defense, but part of their motivation also lay in a belief that the revolution had the power to bring about a societal reform. In a number of discussions, parishioners at Solentiname as well as Cardenal expressed a hope that the revolution would create a society that was more economically just by way of encouraging a more egalitarian lifestyle. One verse that made an impression on the group was Luke 6: 30-31, “Give him whatever he asks; and he that takes what is yours do not reclaim it from him... Treat the rest how you would want others to treat you.”⁵⁵ The responses to this passage are telling. One woman, Teresita, believed that God’s call for a more egalitarian society would take the form of people seeking to educate each other when they commit wrongdoings.⁵⁶ Other members of the church responded with more specific concerns, focusing on the social obligation of the rich, which they felt that the rich in Nicaragua were not living up to. Julio, one of the younger parishioners, interpreted the passage saying, “Just as the rich want us to work for them, they should also work for us.” It was to this point that Cardenal responded. “I say that this system is called socialism,” he said. “Everyone working for everyone...I say that in reality Christ, here, was planning a new society for us.”⁵⁷ Cardenal’s response is vital to understanding his vision for a post-revolutionary society. In his view, socialism provided an answer to a more just society, which it was God’s will to see created on the earth. Thus, according to Cardenal and Julio’s view, Christians—in particular wealthy elites—should yield to the coming of socialism in Nicaragua.

While Cardenal and others sought a just society in which no one was exploited, and while some of their commentaries also condemned those who exploit the poor, there was also broad recognition among the people present in Sunday discussions that the rich, at some point, would have to join the revolution. The revolution from this perspective, then, was not just about the war waged by the FSLN. The revolution, instead, was viewed as a complete restructuring of society that changed exploitative systems. Ernesto Cardenal’s brother, Fernando (who was also a Jesuit priest) often came to Solentiname to attend Sunday conversations. In many cases he called the

⁵⁵ Luke 6: 30-31 as quoted in Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 181.

⁵⁶ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 181.

⁵⁷ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 181.

group to a broader understanding of the revolution. At one point, he said, "...the reality is that there are many men who individually are good in an evil system, and the system requires them to be evil. In a system of exploiters and exploited, many who don't want to be exploiters you see having to exploit. I think the system is as important as the man, and you have to change them both at the same time."⁵⁸ Fernando, like Ernesto, was not shy about approaching the theme of violence, and he too later joined the FSLN's political wing. However his perspective in this passage makes clear that the revolution was not, for the Cardenals, nor for many in Solentiname, just a war. It was a radical change in society, which the FSLN among others worked to bring.

The Christian society that Cardenal and others imagined was not solely about the changing of systems. Ernesto Cardenal and his parish came to understand that in a revolutionary society exploitation would not only be absent, but that also, according to the gospel, love uniting people into a sense of community would be present. In a 1977 reflection, after Solentiname was destroyed by Somoza's troops, Cardenal reflected on the community, and in particular, the people who had joined the fighting, and had participated in a nearly-successful campaign to take the nearby town of San Carlos. Speaking of the men and women who fought, Cardenal wrote,

It happened that one day a group of young men, some from my community, and also some young women, for profound convictions, and after having reflected for a long time resolved to take up arms. Why did they do it? ...For their love of the Kingdom of God. For their ardent desire to plant a just society...I congratulate these Christian youths who fought without hatred, in spite of everything, without hating the police, poor peasants like themselves, exploited.⁵⁹

Cardenal's reflection was not, despite its allowance for violence, meant to develop a philosophy on the just use of violence. Instead, Cardenal emphasized the motivations of the youth from Solentiname to fight. He framed their motivations in spiritual terms, stressing that they fought out of love for God and out of a desire to see a just, Christian society established in Nicaragua. It is precisely this conviction that allowed Cardenal to accept revolutionary violence. The violence of the FSLN was, in Cardenal's view, served to defend the poor from the violence of a corrupt regime. However Cardenal also viewed the revolution as a vehicle to achieve a more just and

⁵⁸ Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 188.

⁵⁹ Cardenal, "Lo que fue Solentiname," 25.

equitable society. Thus, guerrillas could fight “without hatred,” with love for all Nicaraguans who were exploited, and could exercise proper Christian restraint in a conflict that, ultimately, would lead to a more peaceful Nicaragua.

It is impossible to know whether or not Thomas Merton would have agreed with Ernesto Cardenal’s conclusions. Certainly Daniel Berrigan (who was a militant pacifist and also a student of Merton’s) did not think so. In criticizing Cardenal for his acceptance of violence, Berrigan wrote flatly “It may be true, as you imply, that Merton would agree with you. It may be true that Christ would agree with you. I do not believe He would... You may be correct in reporting that ‘those young Christians fought without hate...’ This may all be true: the guns may bring on the kingdom...But I do not believe it.”⁶⁰ Certainly Merton, a devout pacifist, condemned any and all military engagements into which the United States entered during the Cold War. However, since Merton died prior to Cardenal’s joining of the FSLN, it is impossible to say whether or not he would have joined in condemnation of Cardenal’s actions. One letter written to Cardenal shortly before his death seems to hint that even in 1967 Merton cautioned Cardenal about revolution. Merton wrote,

The news you send is not good: but then the news everywhere is bad... and everywhere violence threatens. Our first duty is to human truth in its existential reality, and this sooner or later brings us into confrontation with system and power which seek to overwhelm truth...One must truly be detached and free in order not to be held and impeded...Which is another way of saying that poverty is also our strength.⁶¹

In many ways, the passage seems like an admonishment, or at the very least a stern lecture. Merton seems to have called Cardenal to confront the temptation toward violence, and his caution that a confrontation with systems of power might overwhelm truth reads most of all like a warning. That said, the letter to which Merton was responding has been lost to time, and so it is impossible to know the context of this passage. It could be that Merton was cautioning Cardenal

⁶⁰ Daniel Berrigan, “Killing for Love of the Kingdom,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, (May 1978), as published in “The Cardenal-Berrigan Exchange,” *Voices of Non-Violence*, theology course, University of Notre Dame, electronic reprint, <http://www3.nd.edu/~theo/jhy/writings/otherauthors/EXCHANGE.htm>, (accessed February 15, 2015).

⁶¹ Thomas Merton, from a letter written to Ernesto Cardenal, March 11, 1967, published in *The Courage for Truth*, 159.

about revolution, or it could be more pragmatic political advice, warning Cardenal against some political action that might have at the time seemed hasty.

Certainly Cardenal believed his actions as a revolutionary were both consistent with his ministry and with the social obligation he learned from Merton. In 1990, he wrote,

Merton gave me my religious formation, contemplation, and has been the most important for me...all [Merton's instruction] served me to be a contemplative married to the revolution...As it was taking shape and awakening the consciousness of the people, my consciousness too—and that of my community—was incorporated into the revolution.⁶²

To understand Cardenal's actions, we *must* understand this point. He believed firmly that his actions as a revolutionary, and his support for the FSLN was a social obligation that his role as a contemplative Christian demanded. However he also understood that Merton's emphasis on social action and service to the poor taught him this obligation. And despite Merton's pacifism, Cardenal held to this view. He interpreted his experiences in Solentiname, and thus his experiences of radicalization, as the natural course of his spiritual growth. At the root of that spiritual path, Cardenal saw Merton. And whether Merton would or would not have agreed, Cardenal saw his devotion to his community in Solentiname, and to the revolution, also as a devotion to Merton's legacy.

Often, we are tempted to view such ethical binaries as violence and non-violence as flat issues: we assume that people must fall on one side of the political debate or the other. Cardenal's example challenges this ideological construction. Upon careful analysis, we come to see him not as a former pacifist who turned to an embrace of violence. Instead, Cardenal is perhaps best understood as a lover of peace, and a man deeply devoted to God's call to serve the poor. In a situation in which he had limited power—caught up in a war over which he had very little real control—Cardenal turned his support toward the faction that he believed would defend the community he served. That suffering in Nicaragua has not ended is no more proof that Cardenal was wrong, or delusional. After all, the coming of the kingdom of God was announced over two thousand years ago. And yet, a small community of people on an Island in Nicaragua in the 1970s still had reason to hope that the kingdom was on its way.

⁶² Ernesto Cardenal, as quoted by Santiago Daydí-Tolson in the introduction for *Correspondencia (1957-1968)*, 9.

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